Hellas: Dialect and School

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What characterises a language is its diversity rather than its homogeneity. The Greek language is no exception to this rule. However, the main characteristic of the Greek speech community up till very recently has been its diglossic situation. Charles Ferguson (1959) was the first to introduce the term "diglossia" which he defined as follows:

**DIGLOSSIA** is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation. (244/45)

The roots of diglossia in Greece go back to the Alexandrian period when Hellenistic scholars were at great pains to restore the language of the Classical Age. Their approach to language, which has been called "Atticism", was motivated by their belief that the colloquial speech of their own time was "corrupt". This attitude persisted right through the Byzantine era to take shape in the evolution of **katharevousa** late in the 19th century, the variety based on Classical Greek, and regarded as the official language of the newly founded state.

**What is Modern Greek?**

The 20th century is called the period of **demoticism** (Triandafyllidis 1958) because it is characterised by new linguistic ideals incarnated in the form of **demotiki**, the variety of Greek based on the spoken language of the Greek people. However, katharevousa was the language formally taught at school until very recently (1976), when demotiki was declared the official language of the State. Before 1976 schoolchildren were not exposed to any kind of formal instruction in their native language.

Following the introduction of
demotiki as the official language, there has been a rather protracted debate amongst linguists and scholars concern-
ing the determination of what exactly constitutes Modern Greek (KNE: Koiné Neo-Elliniki, or Modern Greek Common Language) as the prevailing variety of demotiki in now called. Before 1976 a mixed variety of Greek, miki, was widely used as a compromise between katharevousa and demotiki and helped to resolve communicative tensions which typically arise in diglossic situations (Ferguson 1959). In this mixed variety lexical items as well as morphological forms were borrowed from katharevousa; and their traces are still evident in Modern Greek speech, although miki was used mainly as the written lan-
guage.

Diálects

The Greek language does not form any part of the European dialect con-
tinuum; it might be claimed that when we speak of the Greek language, we are “language” as a technical, linguisti-
cally rather than just politically defined term. Apart from a very small percen-
tage of the population — 7.5% according to Miravat (1991), or 5% according to Triandafillo (1938) — who speak varieties which are not considered to belong to the Greek language (Turk-
ish, Slavic, Albanian, etc.), it could be said that Greeks speak a more or less homogeneous language — if one regards mutual intelligibility as the main criterion for differentiating dialects of a common language. How-
ever, if the criterion of mutual intelligibility is the decisive factor, not only for the demarcation of languages, but also for distinguishing varieties of a com-
mom language is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition, we cannot rely on the assumption that the Greek language is homogeneous, i.e. on what has been called the fiction of homogeneity (Lyons 1981), either in our linguistic research or in matters of educational policy.

It is worth keeping in mind when talking of dialects that “dialects and accents frequently merge into one another without any discrete break” (Chambers and Trudgill 1987: 5). This is particularly true of the linguistic var-
ieties in Greece. The poet Solomos wrote in 1842, in connection with the question of dialectal variation that existed in his time:

How many dialects are there? How many? Make sure that you are not misled by the dif-
ferent accents in defining the dialects of Greece. What does it matter if we have ten
words different from the words in Macedon. So what are those great differences? We say par-
eno and elsewhere they say piso, we say main and elsewhere they say main, we say omen and elsewhere they say oim...

and he went on to say:

I had eaten pears from various regions, one from Mantini, and I could understand him per-
fectly well; one from Aetolis, one from Olympias, one from the island of Chios, one
from Filippolis and I could understand them all perfectly well. (Insolites)

Even in the past century, dialectal vari-
ation did not enquire unintelligibility, mostly because the main differentiating
features were phonological rather than grammatical or lexical. This is not, how-
ever, to be interpreted as implying that there were very few morphological and lexical dialectical features. On the
contrary, there has always been consid-
erable morphological variation in the
Greek language, attributable on the
one hand to the vastness of the geo-
 graphical region of the state during the
Byzantine era and, consequently, to
the evolution of various dialects, and
on the other to the diglossic situation
that prevailed up till recently.

Language and education

What, then, is the linguistic situation in
contemporary Greek society, and what
are the educational policies practiced?

Generally speaking, one might say that there are few linguistic differences in
the speech of educated people, and these differences lie mainly in that the
standard is spoken with a regional
accent, which persists in their speech.
However, it is wiser to assume that
there is in Greece a high status stan-
dard accent, like the British English
RP which is employed mainly by public
school graduates.

Dialectal features, either gram-
natical or lexical and, most notably,
phonological or phonemic, which obvi-
ously diverge from the standard usage,
are considered standard or rustic
forms of the language, and are
associated with the peasantry. In gen-
cal, the educated classes consider
the peasantry backward and uncultured,
and this evaluation is reflected clearly
in their mostly negative opinion of reg-
nional speech.

Most teachers in Greece have not be-
come sensitised to an appreciation of
dialectal variation, since dialectology
does not form any part of the syllabus
at university level. On the other hand,
although the State never banned the
de use of linguistic varieties from educa-
tion by any kind of statutory legisla-
tion, standard Greek, i.e. KNE or
Modern Greek Common Language,
remains the standard language of Edu-
cation: textbooks in KNE, for exam-
ple, are uniformly prescribed by the
Ministry of Education for all schools in
all regions of the country.

It goes without saying, that the
contrast between young standard lan-
guage speakers and dialect speakers is
more pronounced in rural areas and in
underprivileged areas of big cities. This
situation generates educational prob-
lems which, however, cannot always be
guaranteed a sympathetic understand-
ing on the part of teachers.

According to Badis (1988), who
conducted research in the Basil Ber-
man tradition, teachers grade more
highly essays by middle class students,
who are standard language speakers,
than those written by working class and
regional schoolchildren. Moreover, their
expectations regarding their stu-
dents’ academic potential and prospec-
tive careers were shown to be deter-
minted to a great extent by their knowl-
edge of the children’s social back-
ground.

Young dialect speakers enter
school with an initial disadvantage,
since linguistic norms are tailored for

Language International 2.1 (1990)
middle class children and especially for standard language speakers. Fragiadakis (1985, 1987) notes that children from lower classes find themselves in an alien linguistic environment when they are first introduced to school, where they are forced to "translate" language used by the teacher and textbook into their own linguistic system whose structure may very well be different.

Some recent language textbooks introduced both in primary and secondary education constitute a move towards the right approach to language teaching, although a great deal of work still needs to be done in this respect. For example, Greek language classes currently emphasise the development of command of written forms of the standard language to the detriment of the development of oral language production.

Language textbooks, which are supposed to underpin and promote mastery of the language in all its manifestations, are primarily based on written forms of the standard language. Instead, language teaching should initially capitalise on the linguistic knowledge the schoolchildren have already acquired in their home environment.

Although there has been no research in this area that I am aware of, it is reasonable to assume that participation of dialect speakers in verbal interaction in the classroom must be low, especially in classes consisting of children from social backgrounds different from theirs. It need not be mentioned that children are conscious of the fact that their accented speech is stigmatised and they even "admit" that standard speech is aesthetically more pleasing and refined. Moreover, depending on teachers' attitudes, dialect speakers run the risk of being penalised every time they attempt participation in class interaction by being "corrected" in an unpatterned and intuitive way. Dialectal features may even elicit ridicule on the part of their peers. These factors make dialect speaking schoolchildren reluctant to express themselves in class. In conclusion, it seems that the general behaviour of teachers seems to favour standard language speakers since evaluation is based on a scale of values of middle class speech.

Dialect speakers' parents, mostly peasants eager to see their children expose an urban way of life and ascend the social scale, recognise that ability in standard Greek will enable their children to achieve higher social and professional status. These sentiments may very well lead dialect speakers "to disparage their own language, and children in particular to develop feelings of linguistic insecurity".

Teachers must be positively disposed to linguistic diversity and persuaded that all varieties of Greek are equally "correct". Adoption of both the right attitude and behaviour can only be achieved by familiarising prospective teachers with linguistic varieties, initially through the school curriculum, and at a later stage of their education through the syllabus at university level. Their syllabus at college should include an Introduction to Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and the Sociology of Language. It is worthy of note that the Kingman Report states that all teachers of English "need some explicit knowledge of the forms and the uses of the English language". Teachers must be made aware of the legitimacy of all the conventions of language behaviour particular to the various social groups to which children normally belong. These conventions may relate to different dialects of different accents and even to different languages; and the child needs to acquire them all in order to operate effectively — and not only in school language, which is the language of his/her public world, but also in home and street language (Kingman Report).

Admittedly, of late there has been an increase in the appreciation of linguistic variation and a growing awareness in educational circles that conventional attitudes must change. Apart from the introduction of considerably improved language textbooks, a collection of texts from various dialects which will accompany textbooks in Secondary Education is in press at the moment.

Moreover, a working team was set up at the Teachers-in-Service Training Centre, consisting of I. Tsolkoptopoulou, S. Hatziviavoli, E. Hombolidou and A. Keramidos, on the initiative of A. Haralamposoulos, Professor of Linguistics, affiliated with the Centre. The team have drafted certain proposals regarding the teaching of Greek, which, they think, should not only focus on all uses of language but should also familiarise schoolchildren with dialectal variation as a source of linguistic richness.

However, it is imperative that in this country, too, a Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of the Greek language be officially appointed by the Secretary of Education, which would investigate the matter thoroughly and make recommendations which the State should undertake to implement.

References

(G): indicates that the language is Greek.


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Language International 2.1 (1990)